





MARY WOLLSTONECRAFT







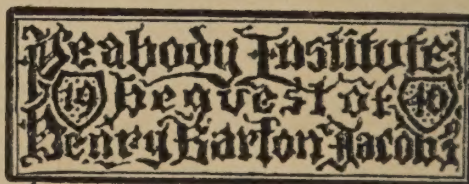
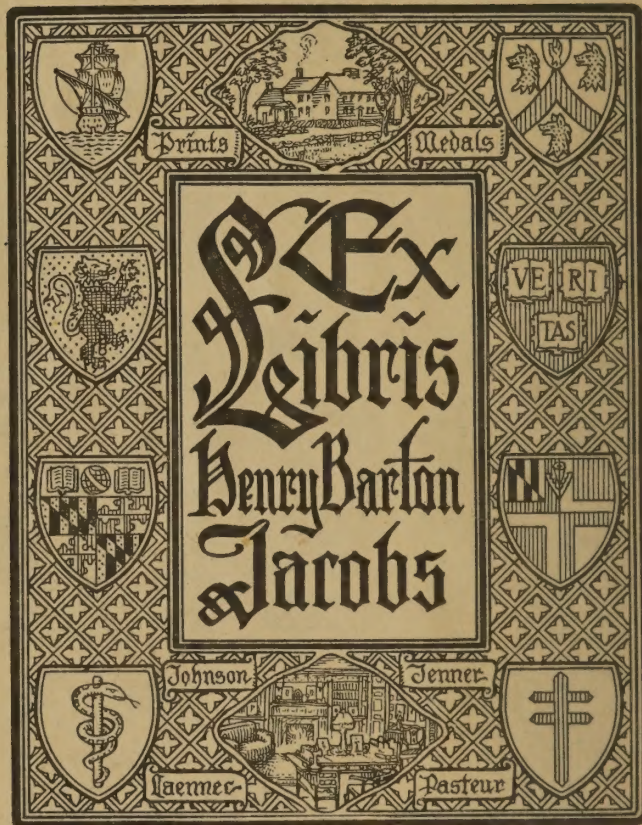


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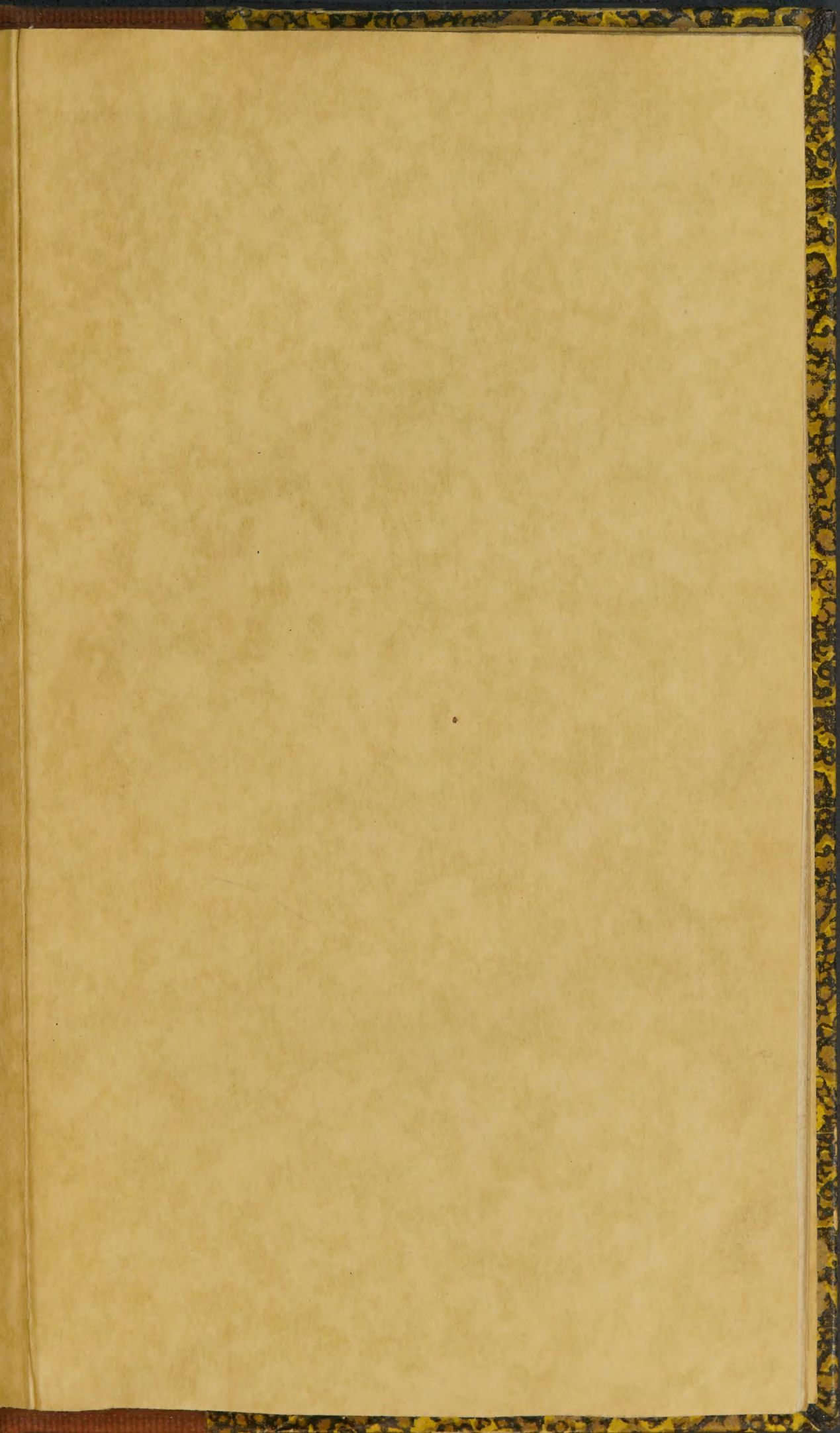
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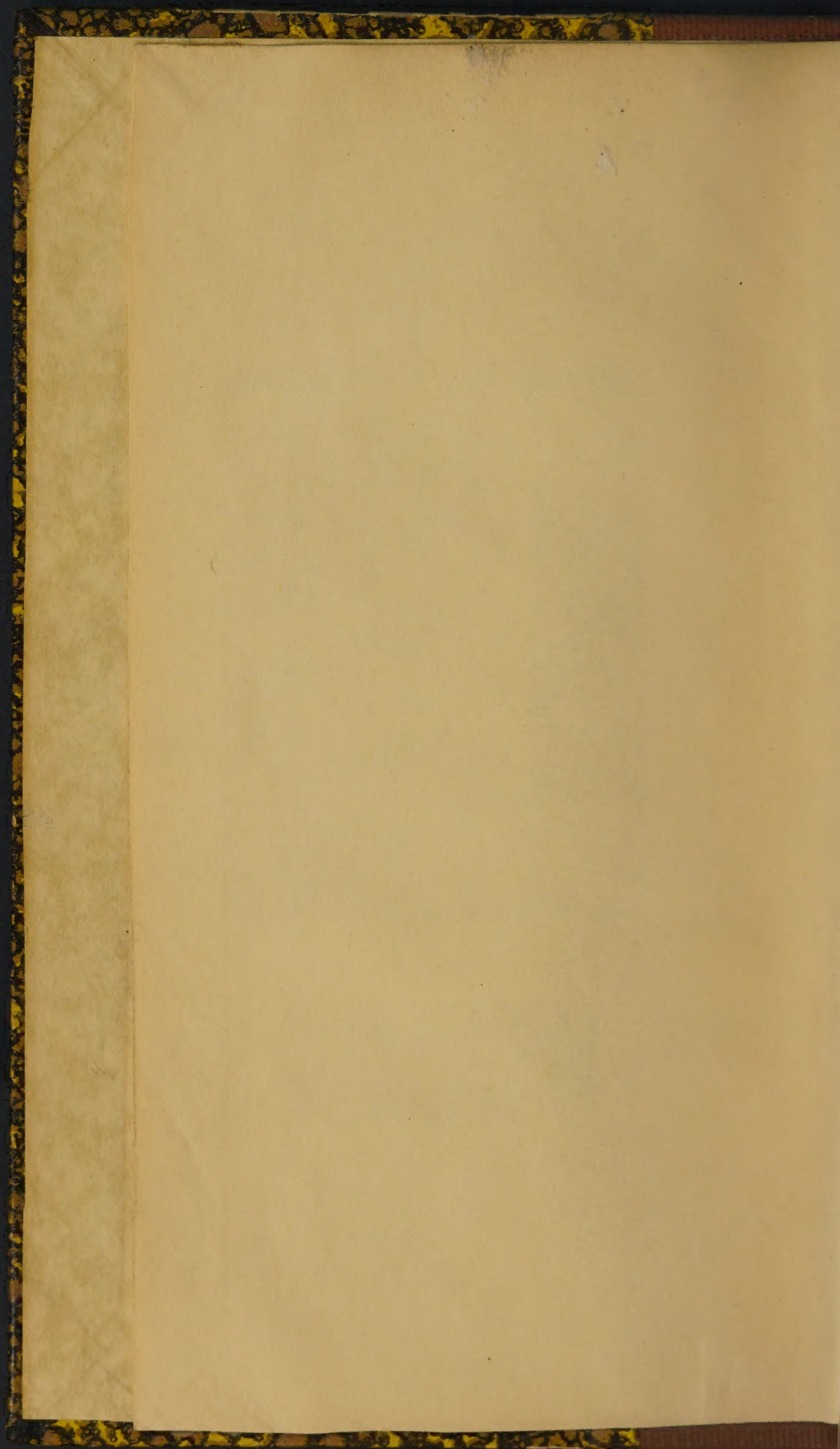
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A  
L E T T E R  
TO THE  
REV. MR. WARNER,  
CURATE OF ST. JAMES'S, BATH,  
REFUTING CERTAIN ASSERTIONS MADE BY HIM  
RESPECTING THE  
A U T H O R E S S  
*(Mary Wollstonecraft)*  
OF THE  
RIGHTS OF WOMAN.

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LONDON:

PRINTED FOR J. PARSONS, No. 21, PATERNOSTER-ROW.

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1797.

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[ Price Six-pence. ]

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TO THE  
REV. MR. WARNER.

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SIR,

**I**F you have acquired the confidence of the world—if you stand before it in a function that by pre-eminence above all others requires a character of un sullied purity, why has that confidence been abused, and the dignity of that function disregarded? Why has that station, to which the public resorts for information on subjects of the most awful importance, been rendered the vehicle of falsehood and delusion; or why has it not subsequently been purified from the pollution it sustained, by that sacrifice to truth, which

B

you

you have been called on so repeatedly and so ineffectually to perform ?

From the man who is convicted of wilfully circulating as truth a falsehood which has not previously imposed on himself, the world turns with the utmost violence of loathing and abhorrence ; and few are found so callous to its opinions and so obdurate in vice, as not to accept of any terms on which they may be acquitted from so hateful an imputation : but if we deem it expedient to punish a crime which, like assassination, mingles the most abject cowardice with an execrable propensity to dark and deadly mischief, we shall rejoice that the slanderer is left defenceless, that no plea can cover him from the resentment of that society to which he stands detected as a viperous enemy. Let him urge that he has accepted in confidence and published in simplicity the falsehood which is traced to him, it is an impotent and ineffectual struggle to disengage himself from the ignominy which inseparably adheres to him. There is no situation of life in which a man may be exempt



empt from the duty of examining the opinions he inculcates, or the authenticity of the facts he adduces in their support : this indispensable obligation increases its force in proportion to the influence with which such opinions or facts are delivered ; and as your office is expressly instituted to obtain and exert influence in its most powerful degree, to scrutinize all that you utter under such an authority is the first and greatest in the catalogue of your duties. To those who suffer by the falsehoods you report, and to those who justly appreciate the degrees of moral turpitude, it will appear almost indifferent whether you have been betrayed by a remissness so deeply criminal to embrace error as truth, or whether in deliberate wickedness of intention you became the author of its existence. To each of these there is a separate stigma attached, certainly sufficient for the gratification of any individual not immoderately enamoured of obloquy ; but you, if I mistake not, in your inordinate appetite for shame, have described the circle of your crime

with a sweep of such enormous latitude, as not only comprehends the one, but infringes on and includes a considerable portion of the other. Yes, Sir, I denounce you not only as regardless of the most solemn duty of your profession, in accepting and circulating as truth the unfounded and perhaps malignant whispers of rumour; but I accuse you also of the deceit of annexing to them terms of certainty wholly unwarranted by the statement you had received, of exaggerating and distorting it, and dwelling on details of your own interpolation, till the person by whom it was imparted to you no longer recognised it as his own, and left your presence (as on his honour he has assured me) persuaded that you had derived additional information from some source more authentic than his own.

That gentleman, to whose candour I am indebted for the assistance which enables me to substantiate this impeachment, has favoured me with an account of the communication which you assign as the basis of your report, and of which the following is a literal copy:



copy :—" The purport of the communica-  
 " tion I received, and which in conversation  
 " I mentioned to Mr. Warner, was, that the  
 " latter end of the Authorefs of the Rights  
 " of Woman had been rendered extremely  
 " diftreffing, in confequence of her previous  
 " fcepticifm, and that her laft words were—  
 " O what a dreadful thing it is to die."  
 Thefe were the materials (cafually and pri-  
 vately picked up, unconnected with any  
 affurance whatever that could juftify an affer-  
 tion fo publicly and folemnly pronounced)  
 with which you fabricated that tremendous  
 engine for affailing the hearts and harrowing  
 the feelings of your audience, when you  
 told them (among other fictions equally par-  
 taking of the fublime and terrible) " that  
 " upon indubitable authority, you could af-  
 " fure them, that the diffolution of the per-  
 " fon alluded to was accelerated by the fuf-  
 " ferings her mind had unremittingly endured  
 " for feveral weeks previous to that event;  
 " that fhe expired in torments too horrible  
 " even for the imagination, confeffing and  
 " bewailing

“bemoaning her errors to a female friend who  
 “hung over her.” To which you added,  
 with a vehemence of enunciation that, in-  
 stead of being so basely prostituted, should  
 have been preserved inviolate and sacred to  
 truth—“With her it was not doubt, all was  
 “fear, madness and horrid distraction.”

Happy should I esteem it for your con-  
 science, if no worse motive had influenced  
 this dereliction of veracity than the despica-  
 ble personal vanity of exhibiting your flaming  
 qualifications as an orator. Happy for your  
 character would be that commutation which  
 should substitute contempt for detestation.

Up to this period your conduct appears to  
 have been uniformly culpable, and the odium  
 it has merited confronts you wherever you  
 turn to elude it. This you should have been  
 told of in a much earlier stage of the busi-  
 ness ; but entering on it, as I did, with an  
 anticipation of resistance from pride disdain-  
 ing to retract, or malevolence obstinate in  
 falsehood, the passiveness of your assent im-  
 posed itself on me for an openness to con-  
 viction



viction of the wrong you had committed, and a liberal promptitude to repair it. Influenced by this delusion, I suspended the strictures you had merited, and only looked forward to that amicable and satisfactory accomplishment of my object which the supposed absence of all dishonourable feeling appeared to render certain. The sequel, however, has destroyed this favourite expectation, and bitterly reproved the credulity which first imputed to you truth and honour, and then looked up to these imaginary attributes for the payment of a tribute due to justice.

On an inspection of the documents I presented to you\*, that reprehensible confidence which had inflated your assertions suddenly shrunk and vanished, leaving no substantial plea whatever to resist a testimony which convicted you of such flagrant misconduct, One shadowy subterfuge only remained, of which you availed yourself with eagerness, though conscious that it could be only a

\* Vide APPENDIX, No. 1 and No. 2.

réspite from the disgrace which so closely pursued you. You fluctuated or affected to fluctuate between the authority on which you had done wrong, and that on which you were summoned to do right.

Unsuspecting of the dissimulation I had to deal with, and determined that no obstacle should impede the progress of my undertaking, I proceeded to Clifton, whither you had referred me, and waited on the gentleman whom you had named as your authority for the misrepresentation which it was my business to refute. He perceived equally as yourself the irrefragable nature of my proofs, and (with a difference of conduct which ought to excite your compunction) in the note I transmitted to you, acknowledged it without reservation. The frankness with which he disclaimed the validity of his own authority in favour of mine, struck away from under your tottering cause the only crutch on which it rested: but as you were deaf to every precept of justice, you were  
blind



blind and insensible to this, its fair and amiable example.

The letter with which I accompanied that of your friend\*, was written immediately after my interview with him, while the agreeable flow of emotion excited by his ingenuous deportment was yet warm, and I was too little open to distrust to resist the impulse which inclined me to associate your character with his. The favourable opinion that letter conveys of you, is an injustice that reflects with the most acrimonious severity on my understanding, and for which, if any thing can atone, it is that total and absolute retraction which I now offer. From this public disavowal of an error I could not recede; for whatever may have been my reluctance to proclaim myself the dupe of a conduct so awkwardly and clumsily insidious, the introduction of the letter I allude to was indispensably necessary as describing the nature of the redress I insisted on, and which as you did not combat it with any objection I

\* Vide APPENDIX, No. 3.

had as much right to expect as if secured to me by a formal stipulation : what it prescribed was indeed a duty which no compact could render more obligatory ; but in violating it thus strengthened, you have given shameful proof that with you neither duty nor compact is binding.

I left you, on retiring from our last interview, pervaded, according to your own acknowledgment, with a conviction of your having been instrumental in the propagation of a falsehood, that not only disarmed you of all power of objection or cavil, but extorted also a confession that justice required you to oppose it by a contradiction. You had at this instant a valuable opportunity of displaying a magnanimity that must have secured to you the approbation of the public ; and as I know you to be an eager candidate for its favour, I could not think so meanly of your understanding as to suppose you would permit this occasion to pass without profiting by the advantages with which it was so pregnant : much less could I think you would so far abuse it, as to convert it to a source of the  
most



most pungent obloquy. You were fairly apprised of my determination to supply any deficiency that might be left in your performance, nor could you, I thought, be forgetful that any attempt at evasion on your part must set aside all respect for your feelings on mine, and that, consequently, to shrink from the full execution of your task would be a tenderness to yourself unjust and unmanly, and as a policy short-sighted and irrational. From every point of view I deduced the flattering prediction, that we should dismiss the affair with mutual satisfaction and approbation. The conduct that would have led it to the happiest conclusion, was so strongly enforced by every relative consideration, that it was impossible with me to resist the expectation of seeing it pursued: honour, integrity and interest concurred in its recommendation; and had I doubted concerning your deference to the first, I should even then have confided in your attention to the more sordid dictates of the last. Unfortunately for you, as unpleasantly for me, you have proved yourself

capable of a desperation that can proceed equally in defiance of rectitude and prudence.

I shall now endeavour to ascertain, by a reference to your letter which appeared in the Bath Chronicle of October 26, how closely you have adhered to the line thus pointed out by every laudable and prudential motive, how far you have acted up to what I demanded, and what you implicitly subscribed to. You say—"What I then gave  
 " as facts I believed to be so, under an au-  
 " thority that appeared to me to merit im-  
 " plicit confidence. Subsequent information,  
 " however, of an opposite nature to the par-  
 " ticulars alluded to, and supported by the  
 " written testimony of the friends of the  
 " deceased, *leads me to fear that my statement*  
 " *was unintentionally erroneous.*" This is obviously the work of a mind propelled by some imperious necessity towards an object of its aversion; it is a contribution levied on a miser, irresolutely proffered by the hand while the heart is tortured by a desire to withhold it.

As



As I have already shewn how little the statement you proclaimed from your pulpit corresponded with that which you received from your friend, I shall spare myself the superfluous trouble of repeating my comment on the former part of this extract: the latter part of it is peculiarly worthy of attention, as exhibiting a most whimsical instance of ambiguity and confusion, created, as I presume, by a wish to compound between the distaste to truth and the necessity of shunning direct falsehood, which seem to have been contending in your mind.

When you say “you are *led to fear* that your statement was *unintentionally erroneous*,” a reader, accustomed to interpret oracles according to their letter, would certainly give you credit for all the obscurity of inspiration, and proceed with reverence to enquire, whether you did really regret that the lamentable and horrible circumstances of your statement had never existed, or whether, in fact, you meant to express remorse for having committed a sin without enjoying the wickedness of  
 devising

devising and intending it: for such is the equivocal sense of this shuffling passage, that it is open equally, and without restraint, to either of these constructions. Do not understand me as meaning to charge your grammatical inaccuracy with this perplexity: no, I am too well assured of having traced it to the disorder and embarrassment of your understanding. Unable to conceal the deformity of your conduct, and dreading the censure which the verdict of the public must stamp on it, you seek to hide yourself in the mazes of entangled construction, and are willing to sacrifice sense to effect a suppression of truth; I therefore explain the passage in question, as expressing an *apprehension* or *suspicion* that you had been guilty of saying what you had no right to say. This, the most true and liberal interpretation it will bear, is not perhaps the most favourable to your character: it favours most nauseously of the Cowl, and at St. Omer's its monkish excellencies might have been held in high esteem, and perhaps even have excited the  
 envy



envy of that *bluntly sincere* fraternity: here, the jesuitical spirit of prevarication which dictated it, only recalls to us, with its concomitant detestation, that odious system of imposture which we have so happily expelled from our altars, and banished for ever from our coasts.

This retraction, or rather this addition of outrage, which should have been an atonement, though written under a most determinate certainty, does not contain a single syllable implying such a state of mind; it represents only that posture of hesitation denominated doubt or uncertainty. The conclusion is immediate: you have felt one sentiment, and proclaimed yourself as affected by another, different even to contrast, and are thereby chargeable with having uttered a falsehood under circumstances which deprive you of the palliative allegations of ignorance, precipitation, or inadvertence.

Following the course of the events, I have thus reviewed you in the perpetration of injustice, and in what you have been pleased to  
offer

offer as an expiation, and to each act have endeavoured to assign its precise character and desert. I have witnessed you as coming forward on the support of an authority avowedly precarious and indefinite, and making a solemn deposition to the world in a tone of the most presumptuous rashness; giving substance to a shade, and intelligence to an echo, confident without enquiry, and daring in ignorance. I have then seen you under the conviction of an evidence, which, carrying the genuine and indisputable marks of truth, precluded all resistance, and then, only when you should have adopted that unqualified stile of declaration which distinguished your opening of this disgraceful piece, I have seen you descend to a mean and paltry equivocation, without honesty to avow the truth, and without art to conceal it.

There is a singularly vicious perversity in this proceeding, which in what it is, affords a striking contrast with what it ought to be: it is the offspring of a corrupt heart acting in conjunction with a depraved understanding,



ing ; and in its consequences, you should find cause to lament the weakness with which you surrendered your integrity to a temptation so grossly impolitic, and so palpably dishonest. You have made that pulpit, which should have been preserved inviolate to the purest offices of truth, an organ of falsehood ; and having refused to purify it from the abomination you have committed, how can you, while it remains thus contaminated, look from it to your audience for that confidence which you have wantonly forfeited, or to your God, to implore efficacy on that sacrifice which you perform with your lips, while his image and attributes are superseded in your heart by a base and groveling passion ?

To men who, like you and me, have been accustomed to walk in that obscurity to which our insignificance properly consigns us, there is something irksome in being thus suspended like a monster, with a label inviting the notice of the public : more especially painful must that sentiment be, if the label contain a warning advertisement of the noxious qua-

D

lities

lities and dangerous habits we exercise, which awakens the vigilance and calls forth the distrust of those who approach us. Such I think is the situation in which you are placed; such at least I am sure you have merited. Degrading and unhappy as it is, I am persuaded you can find little alleviation in reflecting, that you owe it no less to your obstinacy in withholding reparation, than to your alacrity in making it necessary. You will recollect without consolation, that when you refused to supply with your own hand the deficiency I pointed out in your acknowledgment, you left me no alternative. I now rise from the task you have thus peremptorily imposed on me; and in the consciousness of the purity of intention with which I entered on it, and which has presided over the whole of its execution, I hurl contemptuous defiance of all insidious misrepresentation proceeding from any malignant passion I may have excited.

Your's, as you merit,

VERAX.

*November, 1797.*

APPEN-



## APPENDIX.

(No. 1.)

“ SIR,

“ Greatly indeed was I astonished on read-  
 “ ing a letter to Mr. Marshal, which informs  
 “ him that the writer, attending morning  
 “ service at the church of St. James, Bath,  
 “ heard Mr. Warner, curate of that parish,  
 “ assert from the pulpit, that Mrs. Godwin’s  
 “ death was the most shocking that could be  
 “ conceived—that for weeks before her death,  
 “ her mind was in such a state of doubt as  
 “ accelerated her unfortunate end—that she  
 “ died openly confessing her errors, and, to a  
 “ female friend who hung over her, bitterly  
 “ lamented her past life and conduct. And  
 “ these circumstances Mr. Warner assured  
 “ his congregation he delivered from good  
 “ authority!

“ Indignant as I was on reading this  
 “ account of Mr. Warner’s sermon, I  
 “ could not forbear smiling at the impudent

D 2

“ credulity

“ credulity which, in fabricating this edifying tale, should expect its falsehood would not be exposed.

“ Many friends visited and attended on Mrs. Godwin during the period of her confinement, but no one, except Mr. Godwin, with as little intermission as myself. From the day of her labour, until the moment of her death, I never quitted her but for short intervals of rest, and the last seven nights I sat up with her altogether. In the place, Sir, of those terrors and doubts Mr. Warner has described, I found her invariably in possession of fortitude, patience and cheerfulness. She was perpetually alive to the agreeable circumstances of her situation, and received with true satisfaction and animated acknowledgments, the services and attention of her friends. While there were hopes of preserving her inestimable life, we partook of her rational conversation and endearing gaiety. And when in the progress of the disease, delirium seized upon her faculties, she never  
“ uttered



“ uttered a single expression that could have  
 “ been tortured into a support of Mr. War-  
 “ ner’s assertions. Miss Louisa Jones also  
 “ closely attended upon Mrs. Godwin during  
 “ the last few days, and she has given her  
 “ testimony of the serenity which possessed  
 “ the mind of that most extraordinary and  
 “ most admirable woman.

“ But Mr. Warner’s information, it seems,  
 “ extends back to several weeks preceding  
 “ the death of Mrs. Godwin. I have the  
 “ power of confuting this part of the story  
 “ also. I saw Mrs. Godwin almost daily,  
 “ and ever saw her engaging, instructive,  
 “ happy, and exulting in the prospects before  
 “ her.

“ I remain, Sir,

“ Your obedient servant,

“ E. FENWICK.

“ *East-street, Oct. 17.*”



(No. 2.)

“ SIR,

“ Myself and Mrs. Fenwick were the only  
 “ two female friends that were with Mrs.  
 “ Godwin

“ Godwin during her last illness. Mrs.  
 “ Fenwick attended her from the beginning  
 “ of her confinement with scarcely any in-  
 “ termiſſion. I was with her for the laſt  
 “ four days of her life ; and though I have  
 “ but little experience in ſcenes of this ſort,  
 “ yet I can confidently affirm, that my ima-  
 “ gination could never have pictured me a  
 “ mind ſo tranquil under affliction ſo great.  
 “ She was all kindneſs and attention, and  
 “ cheerfully complied with every thing that  
 “ was recommended to her by her friends.  
 “ In many inſtances ſhe employed her mind  
 “ with more ſagacity upon the ſubject of her  
 “ illneſs, than any of the perſons about her.  
 “ Her whole ſoul ſeemed to dwell with anx-  
 “ ious fondneſs on her friends ; and her af-  
 “ fections, which were at all times more alive  
 “ than perhaps thoſe of any other human  
 “ being, ſeemed to gather new diſinter-eſted-  
 “ neſs upon this trying occaſion. The at-  
 “ tachment and regret of thoſe who ſur-  
 “ rounded her, appeared to increaſe every  
 “ hour ; and if her principles are to be judged  
 “ of



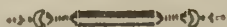
“ of by what I saw of her death, I should  
 “ say, that no principles could be more con-  
 “ ducive to calmness and consolation.

“ I am, Sir,

“ Your obedient servant,

“ LOUISA JONES.

“ Oct. 17, 1797.”



(No. 3.)

SIR,

Having transmitted to you Mr. ———’s  
 note, containing a candid declaration of his  
 sentiments concerning our respective authori-  
 ties, nothing can now add to the complete-  
 ness of the evidence I have laid before you :  
 and from the disposition you have manifested  
 to yield that satisfaction which, in the name  
 of truth and friendship, I have sought, I trust  
 that no hesitation will protract the perform-  
 ance of what you have ingenuously acknow-  
 ledged to be your duty, equally as a christian  
 and a gentleman. As we are agreed on the  
 indispensable necessity of correcting and coun-  
 teracting the misrepresentation which has gone  
 abroad,

abroad, I hope we shall be no less unanimous in the opinion, *that nothing short of a full, explicit and unequivocal disavowal of the error (such an one, I mean, as may not only remove from the public mind the delusion it has imbibed, but impress it also with a clear and genuine idea of the fact,) can be esteemed as an adequate reparation.* This I indulge myself in urging with a more particular emphasis to your attention, both on account of its essential importance, and because I have too high an opinion of the rectitude of your mind, to suppose I wound it in thus doing.

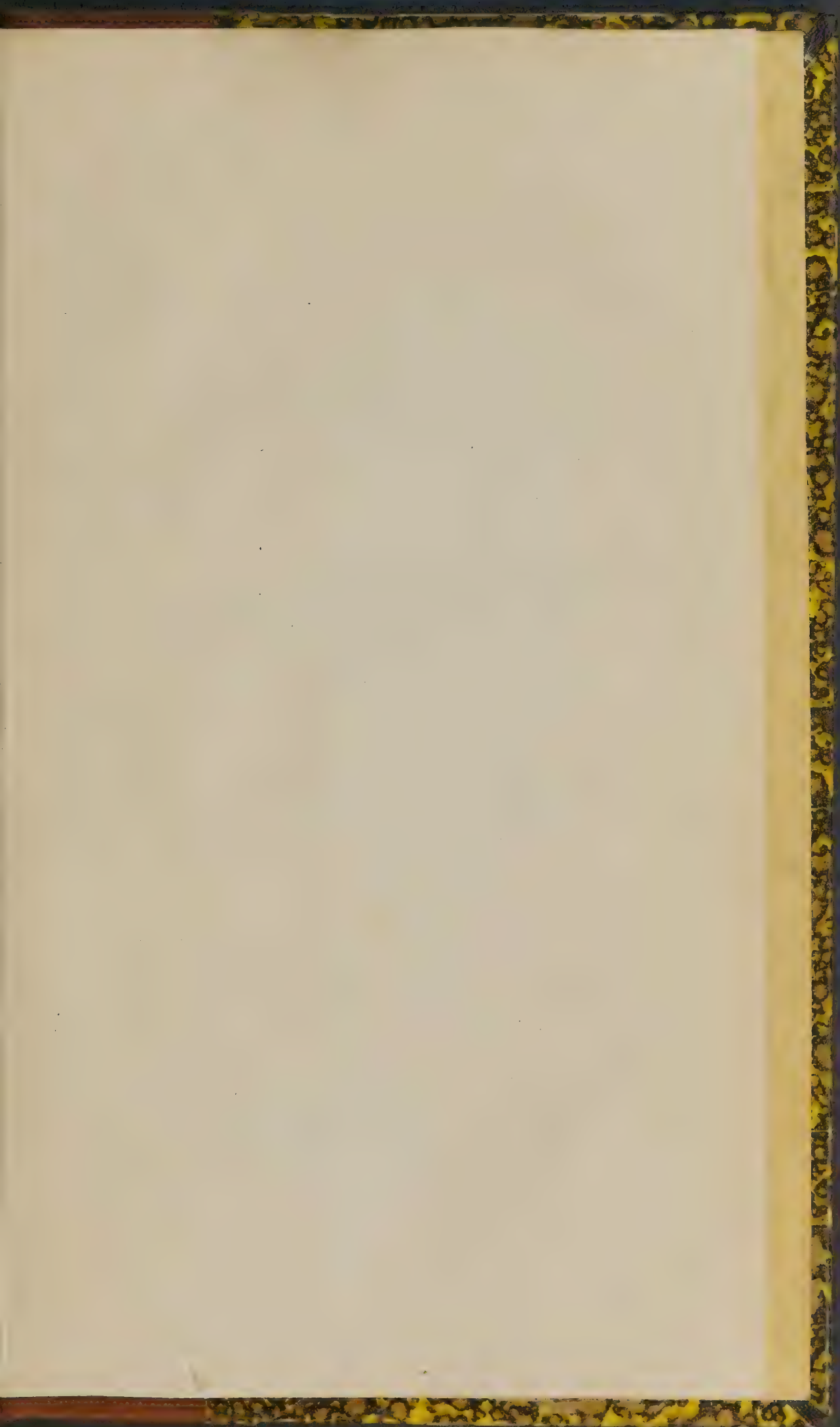
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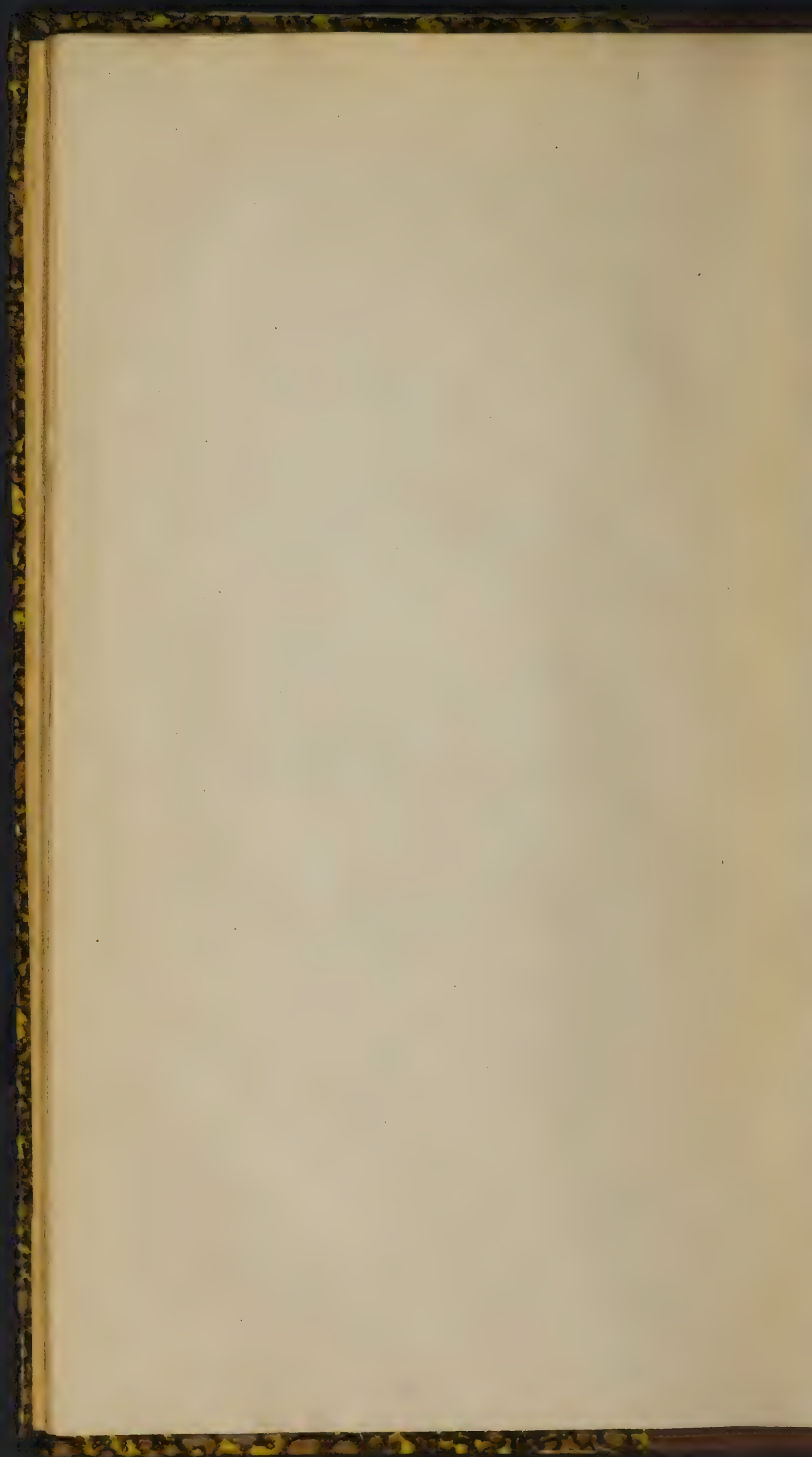
VERAX.

Bristol, Oct. 20, 1797.

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